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By Rick Maze

After a year in which more service members across the military committed suicide than were killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan, four lawmakers have formed a congressional caucus to push for improvements in military and veterans mental health services.

Reps. Michael McMahon, D-N.Y.; Harry Teague, D-N.M.; Phil Roe, R-Tenn.; and Tom Rooney, R-Fla., announced Thursday they are the founding members of Invisible Wounds Caucus in the House of Representatives.

The caucus has two basic goals:

- To promote more awareness of wounds like traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and mental disorders that may not be readily apparent.
- To push for expanded government treatment programs for those suffering from these so-called "invisible" wounds.

In a joint letter to colleagues inviting them to join the caucus, the founders say mental health for combat veterans is "becoming a pressing national issue worthy of our attention."

"Not doing enough has had a high price paid by our returned service members and those close to them in the form of depression, lower quality of life, economic insecurity, substance abuse, and suicide," the letter states.

Gaps in mental health coverage were mentioned at a hearing Thursday that focused on problems facing injured service members as they leave active duty. Jonathan Pruden, a retired Army officer who is an outreach coordinator for the nonprofit Wounded Warrior Project, said the Veterans Affairs Department does not have enough mental health professionals and has policies that are too strict for people trying to get help.

“Too many veterans under VA care for PTSD or other mental health problems are still simply being given pills to manage their symptoms,” Pruden said. “That has to change.”

Residential treatment programs for veterans with mental health issues have placement criteria that can prevent those most in need of help from being seen, Pruden said.

They include requiring veterans to undergo three to six months of outpatient group therapy before they can be accepted as in-patients; having no suicide attempts in the last six months; completing anger management treatment; and being free of illegal substances, he said.

Many Iraq and Afghanistan veterans “have suffered with severe PTSD for some time before VA encounters them,” he said. “An individual may be barely hanging on and cannot wait for a residential PTSD program admission date, which is anywhere from a few weeks to several months away.”

A backdrop for creation of the caucus is a report that says 349 service members committed suicide in 2009, more than the combined 259 combat deaths in Afghanistan and 76 in Iraq.